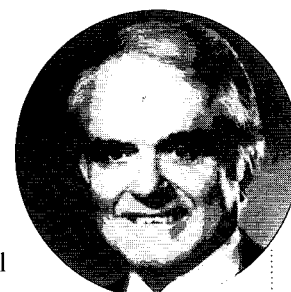


DOES CONCERN FOR CHILDREN'S UPBRINGING JUSTIFY RESTRICTIONS ON THE LIBERTIES OF ADULTS? IRVING KRISTOL AND JACK VALENTI HAVE TWO VIEWS.



Children, Hollywood, and Censorship



Last year, Britain experienced a cultural shock when Elizabeth Newson, head of the child development unit at Nottingham University, issued a report on the effect on children of violence-rich videos. Signed by 25 psychologists and pediatricians, all of the liberal persuasion, the report stated, "Many of us hold our liberal ideals of freedom of expression dear, but now begin to feel that we were naive in our failure to predict the extent of damaging material and its all-too-free availability to children." They added that "by restricting such material from home viewing, society must take on a necessary responsibility in protecting children from this, as from other forms of child abuse."

A storm of controversy ensued. A Labour member of Parliament introduced legislation to limit the availability of such "video nasties." The movie industry, much of whose profits come from videotape sales, cried "Censorship!"—which, of course, is what was being advocated. Then, inevitably, unreconstructed liberal academics insisted that no one had ever proved a causal relation between television violence and aggressive behavior by the young. This was both true and false. It was true such clear-cut, causal relations are beyond the reach of social science because too many other factors influence behavior. It was false because there is an abundance of circumstantial evidence so strong as to raise no reasonable doubt in the minds of ordinary people, and of parents especially.

Brandon Centerwall, a professor of epidemiology at the University of Washington, has summarized much of this circumstantial evidence, focusing on the effect of television when it was introduced to rural, isolated communities in Canada and when English-language television came to South Africa in 1975. In all cases, violent crime rose dramatically, especially among the young.

Like most human phenomena, aggressive impulses are distributed along a bell-shaped curve, and significant effects occur at the margin: "If an exposure to television causes 8 percent of the population to shift from below-average aggression to above-average aggression, it follows that the homicide rate will double."

Centerwall concludes that "the evidence indicates that if, hypothetically, television technology had never been developed, there would today be 10,000 fewer homicides each year in the

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Suppose every Sunday at church you heard the preacher denounce the devil and all his handiwork in unambiguous terms. And then one Sunday the preacher inexplicably changes course, saying, "Well, perhaps we might be able to use the devil every now and then to do things we seemingly can't do for ourselves, so let's not totally exile him." It would surprise you, would it not? Which is why Irving Kristol's embrace of government censorship was to me the equivalent of the preacher consorting with Satan.

I count Irving Kristol to be one of the sanest, most readable and persuasive of commentators who exalt free markets, free expression, free enterprise. Now he is vexed. The villain? "Popular culture" (movies, television, music, cable, prerecorded videocassettes).

He scolds the creative community and declares that government intervention is the only remedy. He plainly states this is censorship. Nonetheless, he encourages the government to act. Lamentably, he is mute on the torment this will inflict on the Constitution, which he has often cited as the title deed of our freedoms.

The central evidence he summons is a study done by a Professor Centerwall. I have read this study. Even a Texas savings-and-loan hustler would blush to endorse Centerwall's quirky conclusions. One is staggered by the enormity of Centerwall's ragged "hypotheticals."

That Irving Kristol, this brilliant, far-sighted political philosopher who has retrieved for us so many truths we too often casually ignore, buys into Centerwall's version of what the Japanese call *zaru ho* (a wicker basket that is supposed to hold water), only proves that when a man is determined to believe, the absurdity of the doctrine only serves to confirm this faith.

Frankly, there are some movies and other works inhabited by language or action or violence or sensuality that I find soiling. But I have a remedy. We all have a remedy. Don't watch, don't listen, don't subscribe, don't patronize. Whatever happened to individual responsibility?

If we probe the prime cause of anti-social behavior, how do we gauge the role of abject poverty, of homes without the daily guiding moral compass of parents, of babies having babies, of too many guns in the hands of too many children, of lies and cheating in business and public officialdom? What is the societal effect of the slackening of discipline in the schools, the faltering trajectory of the church, the breakdown of family ties as the central core of civic virtue?

If you cut the wires to every TV set in the land, would that action abolish the ills that infect us? Would it immunize us

United States, 70,000 fewer rapes, and 700,000 fewer injurious assaults. Violent crime would be half what it is."

So the evidence for some kind of controls over television (and tapes) is strong enough to provoke popular and political concern. Modest limits on adult liberties ought to be perfectly acceptable if they prevent thousands of children from growing up into criminal adults.

Something will surely be done about this problem, despite my friend Jack Valenti, the ACLU, and other extreme interpreters of the First Amendment. The idea that our popular culture can have malignant effects upon society, and especially our young, seems to be an idea whose coming cannot be long delayed.

And if there is a connection between our popular culture and the plague of criminal violence we now suffer, then is it not reasonable to think that there may also be such a connection between our popular culture and the plagues of sexual promiscuity among teenagers, teenage illegitimacy, and, yes, the increasing number of rapes committed by teenagers?

Can anyone really believe that soft porn in our Hollywood movies, hard porn in our cable movies, and violent porn in our rap music is without effect? Here, the average, overall impact is discernible to the naked eye. Clearly, something must be done to lower the temperature of the sexual climate in which we live. And whatever is done will limit the freedoms of adults to indulge their sexual fantasies.

Censorship, some will say, is immoral—though no moral code of any society that has yet existed has ever deemed it so. And it is authoritarian, Valenti and others will complain. But when he and I grew up, unharmed, in an America that accommodated various forms of censorship, the country had far less reason to fear authoritarian rule than it does now, as violence and family breakdown lead to turmoil that only a police state will be able to control.

Lastly, we will be told, censorship is ineffectual. But again, those of us who have lived in a slightly chillier sexual climate have survived as witnesses to the fact that it is not so ineffectual after all. True, censorship makes a difference only at the margin. But in sexual activity as in economic activity, the margin is where the crucial action is.

The most common (hypocritical and politically cowardly) response to the problems generated by our overheated sexual climate is that these are something parents have to do something about. But parents never have been able to do it on their own. They have always relied on churches, schools, and the popular culture for help. Today, no such reliance is possible.

The mainline churches, intoxicated with a vulgarized Freudianism, have discovered that sex is good and repression is bad. The schools hand out condoms to adolescents while timidly suggesting that they ought to limit their activity to "responsible sex"—an official invitation to promiscuity. The culture, meanwhile, is busy making as much money as possible out of as much sex as possible.

No, the government, at various levels, will have to step in to help the parents. The difficult question is just how to intervene.

Irving Kristol, an American Enterprise Institute fellow, co-edits The Public Interest and publishes The National Interest.

against the lacerations of the human spirit that every day in every city cast a shadow over our doors and pave inner-city streets with despondency?

The issue to be regarded seriously is whether or not we have reached that hard, cold place in our history when we can no longer count on individuals to be responsible for their lives, when we throw up our hands and say TV is ruining us and in order to regain our moral balance we must rid ourselves of popular culture's audiovisual blight by enlisting the authoritarian fist of government? Are we so beguiled by our own failures that we turn to government as our "surrogate parent" to save us from ourselves? Didn't the public in the polling booths last November announce

its lack of affection for "government solutions," a voting decision that Mr. Kristol and his persuasive prose and ideas helped shape?

Can Mr. Kristol tell us who will make these censorship judgments for all of us, the rabble and the dolts? What group among us is so all-wise, so divinely inspired that they can pronounce this "okay," this "not okay." Will they be elected or appointed, or will they be canonized by spirits unseen? What is "too much"? Where will the line be drawn and how narrow or wide its boundaries? Can

the most creative of all the art forms, the telling of stories on film, be immune to the reality of life in the neighborhoods and in the streets?

And if we have a censorship board of moral guardians, who will guard the guardians? Have we forgotten that for too many long years movies and television in the Soviet Union were devoid of anything counted to be unsuitable by the Kremlin's hand-picked Communist cadre?

Alas, because poverty, guns, drugs, irresponsibility, disrepair of school and loss of faith in church are so seemingly insoluble, the only easy fix is to ban what we don't like in theaters and on TV by introducing our citizens to the deeper discomforts of government censorship.

I refuse to believe that Mr. Kristol has evicted from his creed his distaste for authoritarian rule. And yet, and yet, there is this niggling, nagging despairing notion that that is precisely what entices him. Which is why I and others who so admire Mr. Kristol can only plead, "Irving, say it isn't so!"

Jack Valenti is chairman and CEO of the Motion Picture Association of America and former special assistant to President Johnson.

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